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ABSTRACT

Despite the recognized importance of contextual factors influencing the perception of child abuse, investigators have often neglected the study of factors such as the gender of the parent, the child, or the observer in determining which parental behaviors will be considered abusive. To assess the role of gender in perceptions of abuse, college students (44 males and 42 females) rated parents' behavior in 8 case studies. Students were asked to judge the severity and appropriateness of the parents' behavior, and to indicate whether they regarded the behavior as child abuse. Results indicated that the gender of the child, parent, and observer did interact to determine observers' evaluations of parental behavior and the determination of the label child abuse. Daughter-directed discipline delivered by fathers was more likely to be labeled as child abuse. Females perceived the same parental behavior as more severe, less appropriate, more detrimental and more abusive than did males. While maternal abuse may be most devastating from the child's perspective, adult observers assumed that paternal abuse, particularly when directed at girls, was most detrimental. These biases may affect reports of abusive incidents. (PAS)

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PARENT, CHILD AND OBSERVER GENDER AS DETERMINANTS OF PERCEIVED ABUSE

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Parent, Child and Observer Gender as Determinants of Perceived Abuse

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Abstract

The gender of parent, child and observer were assessed as determinants of observers' perceptions of child abuse. Eighty-six male and female students rated parents' behavior in eight "case studies". Subjects perceived girls to be more vulnerable to the effects of abuse, particularly when it is delivered by fathers. Daughter-directed discipline delivered by fathers was more likely to be labeled child abuse. Females perceived the same parental behavior as more severe, less appropriate, more detrimental and more abusive than did males. Results are discussed in terms of the effect of gender-based biases on reports of child abuse.

Problem

Despite the recognized importance of contextual factors influencing the perception of child abuse (Michaels, Messé & Stollak, Note 1; Martin, Note 2; Burgas & Conger, 1978), investigators have often neglected the study of factors such as the gender of the parent, the gender of the child, or the gender of the observer in determining which parental behaviors will be considered abusive. Since certain observers of abusive interactions are professionals who make crucial decisions about the child's future, perceptual biases based on sex role expectations and the gender of the observer may provide important information for the practitioner as well as to researchers and theorists.

Herzberger, Potts, and Dillon (1981) recently reported that compared to father-abused boys, mother-abused boys rejected parental discipline techniques as undeserved. These investigators also report that childrens' perceptions of abusive and nonabusive fathers did not differ from each other as strongly or as often as did their perceptions of abusive and nonabusive mothers. One interpretation of these findings turns on the differential sex role expectations people have of mothers and fathers. Fathers are perceived as aggressive, while mothers are expected to be nurturant (Livesley & Bromley, 1973). Thus, abused boys may reject abuse by their mothers as inappropriate, and are more sensitive to acts of discipline from their mothers than they are to the same acts by their fathers, because mothers are not expected to behave in an aggressive manner.

An important question is whether the gender of the parent and child interact to produce differential perceptions of punitive behavior. For example, if an abusive mother is universally perceived as an anomaly, an emotionally rejecting or abusive mother may be particularly devastating (Herzberger et al., 1981) and her behavior will be perceived as more severe, less appropriate, and more likely to lead to disrupted emotional development to both boys and girls compared to the same behavior from a father. On the other hand, to the extent that girls are perceived as less robust than boys and fathers more aggressive than mothers, father-daughter abuse may be perceived as more severe and more likely to lead to disrupted emotional development. The purpose of this study is to test these competing hypotheses as well as to assess the role of the gender of the observer in perceptions of abuse.

Method

Subjects. Male (n = 44) and female(n = 42) college students from a small private college participated in this study as part of their requirements in an introductory psychology course.

Procedure. Participants were given a questionnaire containing eight vignettes, each describing the interaction between a child and his/her parent. Questionnaire administration took place in groups and under conditions of anonymity. The vignettes were selected on the basis of pilot testing which differentiated physical from emotional discipline (type of discipline) and punishment from abuse (severity). The eight vignettes thus varied in terms of a between-subject factor of parent's gender and 3 within-subject factors: gender of child, type of discipline, and severity of discipline. The vignettes were correlated in two random orders and presented as actual case studies altered only to protect the anonymity of those involved.

Participants were asked to read each vignette carefully and to make six judgments about each vignette. The six judgments were: the severity and appropriateness of the parent's behavior (on 7-point scales), the likelihood

that the parent's behavior would increase or decrease the child's tendency to misbehave in the future and the likelihood that the parent's behavior would produce a positive or negative result on the child's emotional development (from -4 = very likely to +4 = very unlikely). Subjects also indicated whether or not they regarded the parental behavior as "child abuse." Finally, subjects were asked to rate the degree to which the parent's action was (a) the child's responsibility, and (b) the parent's responsibility. Both ratings were expressed in percentage form and had to sum to 100%. Following these ratings, subjects were debriefed.

Results

Validity checks revealed that parental abusive behavior was perceived as more severe than punishment, F (1,82) = 930.28, $p < .0001$; abuse was rated as less appropriate than punishment, F (1,82) = 423.81, $p < .0001$; and abusive behavior was rated as more abusive than was punishment, F (1,82) = 707.63, $p < .0001$.

Female subjects were more likely than males to see parental discipline as more severe, F (1,82) = 8.51, $p < .005$; less appropriate, F (1,82) = 6.61, $p < .01$; more likely to negatively influence emotional development, F (1,82) = 6.28, $p = .014$; and as more abusive, F (1,80) = 4.53, $p = .04$.

With regard to differences based on the gender of the child and the parent, discipline towards daughters was perceived as more severe, particularly when it was delivered by a father, interaction F (1,82) = 4.51, $p < .04$. Discipline towards daughters tended to be rated as less appropriate and more likely to lead to negative emotional development, particularly when delivered by fathers (interaction F (1,82) = 3.36, $p = .07$ for appropriateness and interaction F (1,82) = 3.56, $p = .06$ for effect on emotional development). Finally, discipline directed towards daughters was rated as more abusive, particularly when delivered by fathers, interaction F (1,80) = 5.89, $p = .02$.

Punishment (nonabusive discipline) was rated by male Ss as less appropriate when it was directed toward a female child, while cross-gender punishment (father punishing daughter or mother punishing son) was rated as less appropriate by female Ss, interaction F (1,82) = 6.61, p = .01. When rating abusive interactions, males again perceived abusive treatment of females as less appropriate than similar treatment of males. Females, however, believed that abusive treatment by a mother is less appropriate than similar treatment by a father, interaction F (1,82) = 7.67, p = .007.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that the gender of the child, parent and observer interact to determine observers' evaluations of parental behavior and the determination of the label "child abuse." The hypothesis that maternal abuse in perceived as more severe, less appropriate, and more detrimental to future development was not supported. Observers perceived girls to be more vulnerable to the effects of abuse, particularly when it is delivered by father. In fact, daughter-directed discipline delivered by fathers was more likely to be labeled child abuse.

These findings regarding daughter-directed paternal discipline take on added significance in view of Herzberger et al.'s (1981) findings that mother-abused boys saw their mother's behavior as more undeserved than similar behavior by fathers. Perhaps from the child's perspective, maternal abuse is most devastating (for reasons mentioned earlier), whereas adult observers assume that paternal abuse, particularly when directed at girls, is most detrimental. These biases may affect reports of abusive incidents. The fact that females perceived the same parental behavior as more severe, less appropriate, more detrimental and more abusive than did males may also influence report rates of child abuse as well as the assessments of professionals. These questions are worthy of further investigation.

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